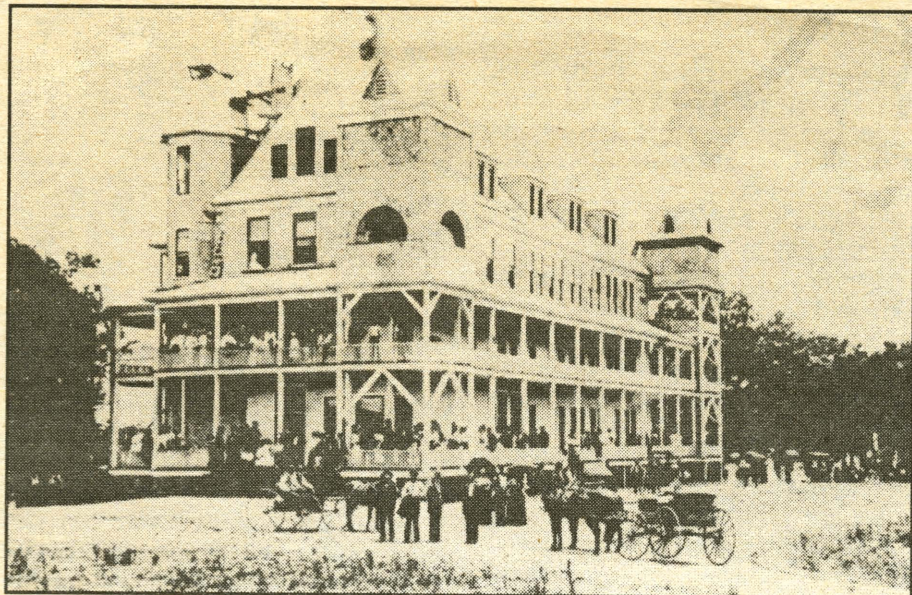


HOUSTON HERITAGE



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Sylvan Beach: Houstonians flocked to popular playground in early 1900s

For more than 50 years, Sylvan Beach served as Houston's playground. For those who wanted to enjoy nature, sample amusements, picnic with friends or dance in the moonlight, Sylvan Beach was the place to go.

Its history dates back to 1892, when the town of LaPorte was established. The Denver land company that developed the property near Morgan's Point intended it to become both a summer resort and a new shipping port on the developing Houston Ship Channel.

To accomplish their resort plans, the developers set aside 22.5 acres on the water as a city park. The company selected one of the most beautiful sites on Galveston Bay with trees draped in Spanish Moss, clear water, a sloping terrain and firm sand. In the beginning, the park was called "The Grove." But by 1898, it had become Sylvan Beach.

The Sylvan Hotel (pictured above) opened in 1893. From its observatory 60 feet above the ground, visitors could see Galveston across the bay to the southeast and miles of unspoiled countryside to the north. A 1,400-foot-long bathing pier and an open-air pavilion for dancing were soon added.

Houstonians could travel to LaPorte on the Texas and New Orleans railroad line. And if they preferred a water journey, boats like the "Charlotte Allen" landed at LaPorte on regular trips between Houston and Galveston.

The 1900 hurricane that devastated Galveston heavily damaged the Sylvan Hotel. The following year, the Catholic Diocese of Galveston purchased the hotel and converted it to St. Mary's Seminary.

Sylvan Beach continued to thrive by attracting large events. The state convention of the Baptist Young People's Union met there for two consecutive years. Regattas were held in conjunction with the Houston Launch Club, and in 1914 the Texas State Rotary hosted a large picnic. Annual San Jacinto Day festivals and Fourth of July celebrations, complete with fireworks and "schooner loads of watermelons," were highlights each year.

It was during the 1920s and 1930s that the park reached its height of popularity. The Parks Brothers Sylvan Beach Band traveled throughout the United States promoting "the largest dance floor in the South" in the pavilion.

Beauty contests began in 1924 and became the high point of the season at Sylvan Beach. Rudy Vallee emceed the 1936 contest as the first of many big-name entertainers to perform at the park. During 1937, the Sylvan Beach stage featured Tommy Dorsey, Benny Goodman, Freddie Martin, Jan Garber, Phil Harris and Ted Weems.

Sylvan Beach was touted as a family entertainment center. A long boardwalk contained a Ferris wheel, an airplane ride, a merry-go-round, and goat and pony rides. Erna Foxworth, who spent much of her childhood in LaPorte and wrote a book on Sylvan Beach, has estimated that as many as 35,000 people came on a holiday to enjoy the amusements. She recalled that teenager Walter Cronkite sold hamburgers there while a young Howard Hughes would sail his yacht to the end of the pier and listen to the band music floating over the water.

The park and dance pavilion survived two world wars, the Great Depression and several storms over the years. But a hurricane in 1943 destroyed much of the pavilion, pier and other property. For 10 years the one-time grand summer resort was silent.

In 1956, Sylvan Beach received a new life when Harris County purchased the property and dedicated it as a county park. The city of LaPorte now leases 5 acres of land and the pavilion, which has been renovated for special events.

The glory days of Sylvan Beach may be a thing of the past, but while they lasted they provided many folks with good times and rich memories.

By Betty T. Chapman